

VZCZCXRO1653
OO RUEHCHI RUEHDT RUEHHM
DE RUEHML #1284/01 1100900
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
O 200900Z APR 07
FM AMEMBASSY MANILA
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 6206
INFO RUEHZS/ASEAN COLLECTIVE IMMEDIATE
RHHMUNA/CDR USPACOM HONOLULU HI IMMEDIATE
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC IMMEDIATE

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 03 MANILA 001284

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SENSITIVE
SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PREL](#) [OREP](#) [MARR](#) [RP](#)

SUBJECT: STAFFDEL MIXTER FOCUSES ON MILITARY, KILLINGS, AND PEACE
CORPS IN THE PHILIPPINES

REF: MANILA 1034

¶1. (U) Summary. During an April 11-15 visit, Staffdel Mixter -- a bipartisan staff delegation from the U.S. House Committee on Foreign Affairs comprised of Cobb Mixter, Melissa Adamson, and Dennis Halpin -- met with high-ranking Philippine military officials regarding U.S.-Philippine military cooperation, senior Arroyo Administration officials regarding government efforts to combat unlawful killings, and various other non-government stakeholders in the unlawful killings issue, including journalists and human rights groups. The Staffdel also visited the sites of two Peace Corps volunteers and toured the American Military Cemetery in Manila. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) In almost a dozen meetings with high-ranking Philippine civilian and military officials, representatives from human rights organizations, and journalists, Staffdel Mixter conveyed U.S. concern about the rise in unlawful killings of leftist activists. Mixter emphasized that the Staffdel was on a fact-finding mission to learn first hand about the issue and to seek ways in which the USG could assist. He acknowledged the difficult task the Philippine government faces, and recognized that some progress has been made. However, he emphasized that much remains to be done.

U.S.-Philippine Military Cooperation: A Mature Relationship

¶3. (SBU) Malacanang Executive Secretary Eduardo Ermita, who also chairs the Presidential Human Rights Committee, praised the "excellent" and "special" relationship the U.S. and Philippines enjoy in military cooperation and noted that the citizens of Jolo Island in Mindanao had clamored that the annual U.S.-Philippine Balikatan military exercises take place there after having seen the contributions these exercises made to peace on the island of Basilan in earlier years. Ermita also noted that the U.S. Rewards for Justice program had proven to be extremely successful, and he predicted that other senior terrorist leaders would be captured or killed in military operations.

¶4. (SBU) Separately, National Defense Undersecretary Ernesto Carolina, in charge of the Philippine Defense Reform program, called U.S.-Philippine military cooperation a "unique" and "mature" relationship. He said that, with the help of the USG, the Philippines was on track to complete reform in the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP). He noted that reform was proceeding even as the AFP waged a war on three fronts: against the Communist insurgency, the Muslim secessionist movement, and terrorist threats. He praised AFP successes against terrorist organizations in Mindanao and underscored that, reflecting U.S. commitment to Philippine military efforts, the U.S. Ambassador Kenney had already visited Jolo nine times during her first year in-country. National Defense Undersecretary Ricardo Blancaflor, also head of the Philippine Anti-Terrorism Task Force separately called the U.S.-Philippine relationship "just short of incest."

Killings Occur in a Combat Context

15. (SBU) In discussing unlawful killings of leftist activists, Ermita provided a detailed historical account of the communist insurgency. He argued that the killings did not take place in a vacuum but instead occur in the context of the Philippines' war against the terrorist Communist insurgency. He underscored that the National People's Army (NPA), the armed component of the Communist Party of the Philippines, routinely ambushes and kills members of the AFP. "There is a war going on," he emphasized. Separately, U/S Blancaflor commented that killings have resulted from the "intensification of anti-insurgency and anti-terrorist drives." Referring to the constitutionally-mandated inclusion of underrepresented groups in the Philippine Congress, Blancaflor added that many within the AFP believe the NPA has taken advantage of the initiative to include Communist elements in the political process. In contrast, Department of Foreign Affairs Assistant Secretary for the Americas Rey Carandang told the Staffdel that the unlawful killing issue had been greatly exaggerated. "We are not in a state of war," he claimed.

"Numbers are Irrelevant; Let's Get to Work"

16. (SBU) U/S Carolina told Staffdel Mixer that the AFP had identified 116 cases purportedly committed by military elements. (Comment: Carolina was probably alluding to the 116 cases identified by Task Force Usig where the victims are leftist activists, not all of which have military suspects. See para 7. End Comment.) Carolina quoted Secretary of Defense Hermogenes Ebdane as vowing that the "numbers are irrelevant; the AFP must get to work."

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Carolina said the AFP needed a strong human rights policy with a solid educational foundation to combat unlawful killings. He noted that the AFP had recently established an internal human rights office and was seeking to strengthen its relationship with the Commission on Human Rights, a government-funded but independent body, to help educate the troops. Lt.Col. Jose, the head of the AFP internal Human Rights Office, separately said his office would refer the cases to the field for investigation and agreed to provide monthly updates on his office's progress to U.S. officials.

17. (SBU) At a briefing by top Philippine National Police (PNP) officials, PNP Deputy Director Avelino Razon assured Staffdel Mixer of the Philippine government's "strong resolve and determination" in protecting human rights. Task Force Usig Director Geary Barias said his office had identified 116 cases involving leftist activists and was prioritizing for investigation those with identifiable victims and perpetrators. Barias harshly criticized Karapatan, the most vociferous leftist organization, which claims over 800 unlawful killings have been committed in the last five years, for its unwillingness to cooperate with Task Force Usig to identify perpetrators. He lamented that the PNP had to work from Karapatan lists obtained from the internet, pamphlets, books, and other sources. He cited the difficulty in verifying cases where Karapatan provided only vague information, such as naming the location of an incident as "northern Luzon." Barias stated that the PNP had recently worked with the Department of Justice on an executive order that would permit closer police-prosecutor cooperation, thereby enhancing prosecutions. Razon added that the President was expected to sign it shortly.

Justice Melo Offers Personal Recommendations

18. (SBU) Former Supreme Court Justice Jose Melo, who headed a Presidentially-appointed Commission on Extrajudicial Killings, told the Staffdel that President Arroyo had extended the Commission for several months, specifically to meet with leftist organizations. However, Melo had decided to defer hearings until after the May 14 midterm elections, fearing that leftist activists would use the

issue as a political club to batter the Arroyo Administration. Melo said Karapatan had previously approached him through the French Ambassador to testify. However, with the arrest of a leftist congressman in connection with an NPA internal purge in the communist movement in the early 90's, Karapatan had withdrawn its offer, he said.

¶9. (SBU) In addition to the widely reported Melo Commission's recommendations to combat unlawful killings, Justice Melo offered two personal recommendations: exemplary justice and military firings. He called for the Philippine government to prosecute a handful of midlevel military officers to demonstrate its seriousness about the issue. He argued that such exemplary justice would have a deterrent effect on other would-be perpetrators. He further proposed that the President give military commanders a prescribed period of time to investigate and resolve killings in their areas of responsibility. Those who failed should be summarily removed from their position, he said.

¶10. (SBU) Malou Mangahas, Chairperson of the Board of Editors of the Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism, separately bemoaned the "reprehensible lack of results" in the government's fight against unlawful killings. She questioned President Arroyo's ties to the military, suggesting that she was beholden for support during the failed 2006 coup attempt. She also claimed that, by publicly praising in her 2006 State of the Nation Address now-retired AFP General Palparan -- whom the Melo Commission singled out as partly responsible for the killings -- President Arroyo was sending mixed signals regarding her commitment to stop the killings. Mangahas also called for "exemplary justice" to convince citizens to "believe in the government again."

¶11. (SBU) Renato Mabunga, Secretary General of the Philippine Alliance of Human Rights Advocates (PAHRA), told the Staffdel that his organization had counted 103 cases of unlawful killings between 2001-2006. Explaining that the phenomenon cut across many societal sectors, he said over a third of the victims were farmers who had been killed by landowners when they attempted to reclaim disputed land. He added that many killings involved journalists killed by politicians who believed they had been libeled, while other cases involved non-political petty criminals killed by vigilante groups. Mabunga nonetheless blamed many of the killings on security forces and argued that, whether or not the government was ordering the executions, it was responsible for stopping them.

¶12. (SBU) Purificacion Quisumbing, Chairperson of the Constitutionally-mandated Commission on Human Rights, said that disappearances and unlawful killings were interrelated since most people who disappear are eventually found dead. She said that the

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Commission had identified 250 cases that required investigation. She denied that the unlawful killing issue constituted a "crisis," however, and labeled Karapatan's claim of over 800 killings a "gross exaggeration." She underscored that the Philippine government is a party to all international human rights treaties and has a legal obligation to comply. She commended the role of the active and vocal civil society in holding the government accountable for human rights violations.

Staffdel Visits Peace Corps Volunteers

¶13. (U) The Staffdel traveled outside of Metro-Manila to visit two Peace Corps volunteers in the Subic Bay area, two hours north of Manila. The Staffdel visited Marian Hills, an extremely poor community without a school where one volunteer home-schools children of all ages in a variety of subjects, as well as the Shepherd of the Hills Children's Home, a long term shelter where another volunteer provides basic education and development activities to over 50 neglected children aged 3-12, most of whom have been orphaned, abandoned, or abused.

¶14. (U) The Staffdel has approved this message.